

DAVID LEMM: MAPPING ISLANDS IN THE CITY

Phil Cohen interviews the artist

David Lemm about his work at Kings Cross.

David Lemm is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Edinburgh. He studied animation at Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee, graduating in 2006. In this interview, Phil Cohen asks about the work which he produced as artist in residence at the [House of Illustration Gallery](#) in Kings Cross in 2015 and which was exhibited there the following year.

The works referred to in this interview and many more can be seen at <http://www.davidlemm.co.uk/>

PC: *What were the landmarks and lines of desire in your early life?*

DL: I grew up in a new town in Fife in Scotland, Dalgety Bay. I was always poring over maps as a kid and I was the chief navigator on family car journeys. I was fascinated by the symbols and legends on maps. I wasn't really interested in geography at school but I was always exploring the landscape - we spent a lot of time hanging out in the woodlands and by the beach.

PC: *What were the early influences on your present work?*

DL: I went to art school and studied animation, I didn't particularly want to work in an animation studio or make cartoons, I was more interested in the technical possibilities. My chief early influences were Len Lye, Norman McClaren, Michel Gondry, surrealism and Kandinsky. I was interested in the more abstract work and in audio-visual experimentation, especially with music. This was what led into my interest in maps as forms of graphic abstraction. If you took the street names off a map, you would essentially have a piece of abstract art. And when I came across old nautical chart, I became fascinated with the idea that this was graphic information that used to define what was real, they saved lives, but now the sea and coast has changed, so they are no longer operational. I couldn't read them, they were like graphic debris, so I started using them as a kind of base map and made my own marks on them. I am also interested in maps as objects or artefacts, rather than as flat screens. The framing of my work is often intended to emphasise that 3-D aspect.



PC: *Was this the starting point for your exhibition in 2015 - [Debris and Phenomena](#)?*

DL: Yes, so it was printing on sea charts, and exploring the tension between the birds' eye view of conventional maps and the more grounded street level view of the world. I visited the Isle of Eigg, and investigated the role of maps in its governance, but also their role as symbols of identity. I did fieldwork, interviewed people about the maps they used, agricultural maps and so on. I realised that maps are starting points for storytelling. I hit on the idea of making maps from my stories. I chose six key themes from my research with the islanders. I started to think of maps as abstract diagrams and in this context how they might be used to explore life off the grid.

PC: *Your work is very much about deploying icons to represent landscapes. Often icons are monumental, they are very large features in the physical environment - iconic buildings are explicitly designed for their dramatic features, to stand out visually, to dominate the landscape. They symbolise wealth and power. But your icons seem to work in quite a different way, they have a much more intimate register.*

DL: Yes, Big Ben doesn't tell you much about the pattern on the ground below it. But your own personal geography works at quite a different scale, it is made out of small marks, you build your identity out of what you notice or don't notice. This show is based on a residency here in Kings Cross at the [House of Illustration Gallery](#) and is about mapping the changing place and space around the gallery using a diagrammatic language. I was a total stranger to the area.

PC: *Well the making over of Kings Cross into a cultural quarter – it used to be a red light district after all - involves a very calculated piece of public placemaking.*

DL: The Kings Cross Development isn't that much smaller than the Isle of Eigg. At one point I was thinking of Kings Cross as an island. It's a privately owned public space that's why it is so clean, they have 24/7 maintenance, but if you go to the Caledonian Road it's a bit rougher and lived in. The canal serves as a kind of coastline, so I began to think about these manufactured islands inside a city.

PC: *Could you tell us something about your methodology and perhaps give us some examples? As you walked about the area, did you make visual notations? It is a process of translation or transcription from walking to mapping?*

DL: I wanted to chart my experience of the place over the six month period of the residency. One of the limitations of the traditional map is that it's a freeze frame, like a snapshot just capturing a moment in time. Each wall in the exhibition consists of 24 panels, representing the North, South, East and West direction of my walks, with one panel for each month of the residency. The co-ordinates are the specific times I was here and the specific sites I noticed. The whole room is a map and the pieces on the walls are like portals into it.



*Mapping Kings Cross: South
August, September, October*



Mapping Kings Cross: East - July



Mapping Kings Cross: West - July

PC: *Is the legend the map in this case?*

DL: Yes. These are not maps you could use to find your way around the area but distillations of my experience translated into symbolic forms. They are little narratives, which depict changes in the environment so they form a sequence of micro events which I have noticed.

PC: *As you walk round what the viewer has to do is learn a vocabulary of signs, which sometimes bears a family resemblance to conventional cartographic signs, but which are often quite unique and invented by you.*

DL: For me the visual quality is more important than the information they convey.

PC: *Some of the pieces have a delicacy and precision about them which reminded me of Paul Klee. They have a strong visual appeal and graphic presence but the deeper mapping that has gone into their making is not so visible. The viewer has to do more work to get to it.*

DL: I want these works to make people curious, to encourage them to go out and explore the environment for themselves. We organised a participatory event, as part of **The Big Draw**, where people had to find their own markers and make their own symbols. I created a number of synthetic cairns, which functioned waypoints and participants had to find them. They functioned like the *You are Here* maps but at each point, instead of looking at a map to find out where you are, you looked around and made visual notations, you worked from the territory not the map. About sixty people took part over the course of the day. The things they noticed and notated varied enormously but there was a lot of commercial signage and branding, especially from children who drew Coca Cola and Waitrose signs! Part of the challenge was to use the graphic representation of the area as a base line to make your own map.



The Big Draw: You Are Here



Synthetic cairn from *The Big Draw*

PC: *Kings Cross is an interesting area - you have this mixture of industrial archaeology and hypermodernist architecture. In the case of Central Saint Martin's you have a Victorian warehouse façade hiding a glass and steel structure. It's rather extreme the way the two architectures interact. How did those who took part in your event relate to this?*

DL: They all homed in on the brickwork patterns so in that sense they found it easier to notice the more historical aspects of the environment rather than the new stuff.

PC: *In these pieces here is a rather subtle interplay between what is familiar and what is strange. You can identify some of the elements and not others. You are always cross referencing between map and territory at point where they don't quite correspond.*

DL: I'm interested in being mischievous. Everything is based on what is out there, but sometimes I throw in an element which is not there any longer. The play of the visible and invisible concerns me. I want to throw people out of their everyday stride, and get them to notice stuff which they would not normally pay attention to. I also wanted to capture something of the incidental forms that are thrown up in and around a construction site - a pile of stacked bricks becomes a kind of pop-up sculpture. There was a skip garden, for example, which contained a lot of material from the old railway yards. So again the aim was to use the exhibition to draw attention to the emergent, and easily ignored aspects of a rapidly changing environment.



From *House of Illustration* (2015)